

At the Bus Station in Bihać

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Bihać bus station, 26 March 2022. Photo: Dagmar Nared

Bihać is the capital of the Una-Sana Canton, located in the north-west of Bosnia and Herzegovina. There are many people on the move in the city, trying to continue their journey towards the west, but due to strict border policies, they are often returned (cf. **pushback**) to the city or to **camps** in the surrounding area. They are moving not only towards the EU border, but away from it as well – towards Sarajevo, albeit not voluntarily, but due to circumstance.

Unlike the **game**, they travel to Sarajevo by bus from the station in Bihać, where they buy a ticket for 50 Bosnia and Herzegovina convertible marks. My interlocutors, two migrants from Pakistan and a group of five migrants from India, to whom I spoke in the car park behind the station, said that they had returned from the game the same day or the day before and were waiting for a bus to Sarajevo, where they would receive medical care, food and clothing. They will use this visit to gather strength for their return to the canton and a new opportunity to go on the game. They arrive in Sarajevo, traveling away from the EU border, without any problems, while the route back to Bihać, i.e., back towards the border, causes more problems. The direction of movement therefore plays an important role. But the border has many meanings, and they are changing. The borders of politico-economic entities are no longer at the outer boundaries of territories, but are, in a small way, scattered everywhere where the movement of information, people and things is happening and is controlled (Balibar 2002: 71).

The two migrants from Pakistan were waiting for the bus on the lawn next to the car park, sleeping in sleeping bags, with rubbish lying around them. They looked tired but welcomed me and my colleague very nicely. Only one spoke, saying that he had been forcibly returned the day before and was now waiting to be taken to Sarajevo. The migrants from India were in a good mood and accepted our invitation to talk, but they were not very talkative.

According to a person who helps people on the move in solidarity, migrants can buy a ticket to Bihać in Sarajevo for the same price, but they are not told that migrants are forbidden to use public transport in the Una-Sana canton. On 19 August 2020, the authorities of the canton of Una-Sana adopted a decision banning the entry and transport of migrants to this territory. This is more a ban on types of transport from other parts of Bosnia and Herzegovina rather than within the canton itself. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the authorities imposed certain restrictions, most of which were justified, but at the same time the situation was also used as an excuse to further restrict people on the move (Mlinarević and Ahmetašević 2022: 11). Nevertheless, it is hard to ignore the question: how can you take money from someone and sell them a ticket, knowing that they are unlikely to reach their destination? It is also striking that this ban is still in force today, even though the various restrictions due to the pandemic are no longer perceptible in the city, and that the police turn a blind eye to the deal and do not

criminalise this type of 'assistance.' Also, as journalist Selma Boračić-Mršo writes, the implemented measures raise the question of the consistency of the decrees themselves with the legislation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In 2018, she notes, two police checks were carried out at two entrances to the Una-Sana canton. One was set up in Ključ, a municipality in the north-west of the country, and the other in Bosanska Otoka, a town 22 km from Bihać. These police officers refuse and prevent migrants from entering the canton on a daily basis.

Travelling from Sarajevo towards the Una-Sana canton, they are stopped in Ključ, on the border of the canton. According to the mentioned volunteer, these passengers are racially profiled by their darker complexion and, despite having valid tickets, are ordered off the bus. There, they are shown a remote trail, at the end of which they are met by a driver who, for a fee of course, takes them to their destination. Although none of my interlocutors mentioned that they personally crossed this internal border, they said that they had heard several stories similar to the one mentioned by the person who helps migrants in solidarity. It was the first time that the interlocutors from India were waiting for a bus to Sarajevo, as they had only been in B&H for one week, coming from Serbia, and were returned from the game for the first time on that day. The destination of their migration, as well as the destination of our interlocutors from Pakistan, was Italy.



Una-Sana Canton, Bihać, Ključ and Sarajevo in BiH. Map interventions made by Jan Grah

Leaving the canton does not present a problem (Boračić-Mršo 2020). This movement, of course, is towards the interior of B&H, while returning to the canton is much more difficult. First and foremost, as Balibar writes, the issue involves modes of inclusion and exclusion in the spheres of bureaucracy and power relations, as well as relations of communication and cooperation (Balibar 2002: 72).

The police cooperate with the IOM (International Organisation for Migration) and allow migrant minors and families with children, which belong to risk groups, to enter the canton (Boračić-Mršo 2020).

At this point, I can only hope that my interlocutors have gathered strength and received help in Sarajevo, and, above all, have returned to the canton successfully without any major complications.

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Literature

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